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ABSTRACT

Becoming a mother-in-law is a challenging task but one which has received little serious attention from theorists and researchers. In Family Life Cycle developmental theory, this stage has been referred to as a post-parenting phase. In Family and Couple Developmental Theory, emphasis is placed on the need of the individual or couple to separate from families of origin. In this context, theorists and therapists advise mothers to step back gracefully and to divert their energies elsewhere. An exploratory study was conducted which involved interviews with 24 mothers whose daughters had married not longer than 10 years ago. A significant finding of the study was that the mothers appeared to have an ongoing parenting role during the phase of their daughters' growing relationship with their future husbands, and during the earlier years of marriage. Subjects' descriptions challenge the notion of a non-existent or static role during this phase, and also challenge the emphasis in Developmental Theory on separation and individuation. During the last decade, feminist researchers, clinicians, and scholars have questioned this emphasis in their description of women's development. Surrey (1985) used the construct "relationship differentiation" as a contrast to the idea of separation/individuation. There is a clear congruence between Surrey's concept of developmental relationship differentiation and the description given by the research subjects of their relationships with their adult daughters. (Author/NB)

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BECOMING A MOTHER-IN-LAW: A COMPLEX TASK IN PARENTING AN ADULT DAUGHTER

Juliet Gauchat

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Paper presented at the American Association for Counseling and Development, Boston, MA, March 15-18, 1989.

ABSTRACT

Becoming a Mother-in-Law: A Complex Task

in Parenting an Adult Daughter

Juliet Gauchat, Ed.D.

The mother-in-law in American society has been stereotyped as controlling, interfering, critical, divisive and foolish. In fact all mothers whose children marry become mothers-in-law at a time of their children's choosing. This is a challenging task but one which has received little serious attention from theorists and researchers. In Family Life Cycle developmental theory this stage has been referred to as a post-parenting phase. In Family and Couple Developmental Theory emphasis is placed on the need of the individual or couple to separate from families of origin. In this context theorists and therapists advise mothers to step back gracefully and to divert their energies elsewhere. This paper describes findings from a recent exploratory study involving interviews with 24 mothers whose daughters had married not longer than 10 years. A significant finding of this study was that these mothers appeared to have an ongoing parenting role during the phase of their daughters' growing relationship with their future husbands, and during the earlier years of marriage. Subjects' description challenges the notion of a non-existent or static role during this phase, and also challenges the emphasis in Developmental Theory on separation and individuation. During the last decade feminist researchers, clinicians and scholars have questioned this emphasis in their description of Women's Development. Surrey (1985) uses the construct "relationship differentiation" as a contrast to the idea of separation/individuation. There is a clear congruence between Surrey's concept of developmental relationship differentiation and the description given by these subjects of their relationship with their adult daughters.

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Becoming a Mother-in-Law: A Complex Task in Parenting an Adult Daughter

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Introduction

In the United States a myriad of mother-in-law jokes still weave their way through day-to-day communication. These two were casually gathered from radio programs.

- Why did Adam and Eve live in Paradise?
  Because they did not have a mother-in-law!
- Behind every successful man is a surprised mother-in-law.

The description of mixed emotions was included in an interview in Time Magazine. "It is like watching your mother-in-law drive over a cliff -- in your new Cadillac." In television ads SHE notices right away that her son's wife does not use "Calgonite" in her dishwasher, or "Wisk" on the shirts.

Who is this mother-in-law, this intrusive, meddling, divisive woman of the stereotype? At Radcliffe in the Schlesinger Library, one of the richest collections on American women in the United States, only two references to mothers-in-law are in the card catalogue. A library computer search similarly produced surprisingly few articles dedicated to understanding or

describing this role. Duvall published a study on in-law relationships in the 1950s, but this book is now out of print.

In fact, all mothers whose children marry become mothers-in-law at a time of their children's choosing. They do not divest themselves of a mothering role as that of mother-in-law is added, but must simultaneously take on the extra role while reworking that of mother. As my own children grow older, I am struck by the range of challenges which confront mothers. The earlier tasks have historically had more attention paid to them. The importance of early bonding with an infant has been addressed by Bowlby (1969), reaction to a child's early individuation has been described by Mahler (1975). Among others Blos (1979) has explored in detail adolescence, and the tasks of parents at this stage. There has also been inquiry into the feelings parents experience during these different phases, especially when an infant enters the family. A mother's mixed emotions, her joy, her possible ambivalence, her uncertainty have recently been described with sensitivity and understanding.

But Duvall (1977) coined a phrase "the post-parenting phase" to describe the stage in a family when children grow to be adult, and marry. The Rapoport's (1977) note that the preponderance of studies, on later relationships between parents and adult children limited as they are emphasize the reversal of roles. They do not explore "the feelings involved in what is doubtless a salient, if drawn out transition." (p. 347)

Treatment of This Phase in Family & Couple Developmental Theory

The literature which does exist, largely derives from the perspective of the adult child or the couple as they go about the business of creating their own entity. Family development theorists Duvall (1977) and Carter and McGoldrick (1980) stress the need for the couple to separate from the family of origin during this phase. Duvall perceives parents as providing a Launching Center for children and defines the post-parental task of a mother as needing to shift her time and attention from the rearing of children to projects outside of her family, such as engagement in career, community service, and other outlets for her need to nurture. Carter and McGoldrick (1980) create a stage prior to marriage classified as the Unattached Young Adult whose vital task is to come to terms with his or her family of origin. They further define this task as separating from his/her family without cutting off or fleeing reactively to a substitute refuge. Haley (1973) in his developmental model paints the image of parents needing to be weaned from their children.

Couple theorists similarly focus on separation and individuation when describing the transition to marriage of an adult child. Blanck and Blanck (1968) in placing this phase on the continuum of individuation make an analogy to the toddler/mother relationship, and therefore the need for parents of the newly married couple to assume the role of "catalyst." Blanck and Blanck emphasize that separation/individuation in normal development is relatively rather than absolutely

completed, and the tendency to regress to the symbiotic phase remains throughout life, particularly a wish for maternal reunion at times of stress.

Mothers/In-Law are Advised to Step Back Gracefully

In response to this definition of the tasks of the individual and the couple, mothers are summarily advised to step back gracefully, to launch their children, to act as a catalyst, to shift their attention elsewhere. Mothers-in-law are advised similarly, but their instructions (with society's permission) have often been couched in hostile and sometimes devastating humor.

The simplicity of this advice is perplexing to a mother whose children are embarking on relationships which could or do lead to marriage. The dimensions of the phase which they are experiencing are complex and significant. The intertwined tasks of becoming a mother-in-law and simultaneously redefining the role of mother in relation to the particular child who is marrying signify a powerful transition. The ramifications of the resolution or nonresolution of these tasks reach far into future relationships. At best, there is the possibility of having another family attachment, one where bonds have been forged later on in life and therefore not trailing the scars of sibling comparisons, confused expectations, and other family apparel. A maternal relationship can continue with one's child, son or daughter, but with changed boundaries and a quality of mature interdependency and of quality. At its worst, it can leave

parents and children with a legacy of bitterness, unable to pursue an old relationship or forge one anew.

The summary advice to step back gracefully does not address the complexity and varying stress of inviting a new member into the family and the potential during this phase for projection of negative feelings onto the mother-in-law. It does not help a mother, who has also become a mother-in-law, understand the couple's tasks early on in marriage so she can perceive some behavior perhaps as appropriate to a stage, rather than re-act to it on a personal level. Such advice does not grant permission to experience a range of feelings which is not only appropriate but also helpful to the process of accomplishing the necessary shifts concomitmant with a child's marriage. It does not describe the thoughtful adjustment of emotional and pragmatic boundaries which must take place in order for a parent to support a relationship rather than her or his own daughter or son. To some extent this has been asked of them before in the realm of their child's friendships. But marriage invokes a public commitment and a redefinition for the whole family.

A recent demographic survey from the Wall Street Journal (April 1987) showed that 63% of parents aged 65 and over see their adult children daily or weekly. It is clear that many mothers/in-law maintain a relationship with their adult children that is consistent and seemingly significant. It seems imperative that we should know more about how parents, and mothers who also become mothers-in-law at the time of their

child's marriage, experience this transition, and what strategies are employed to positively negotiate this stage in parenting.

Findings From an Exploratory Study of the Experience of Mothers as Their Daughters Marry

I recently completed an exploratory study in which I interviewed 24 women whose daughters had married within the last 10 years. Subjects had graduated from one of the seven sister colleges in the U.S. (namely Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mt. Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, Wellesley) between the years 1949 and 1960. Their daughters were at least 20 years old when they married. Discretion should be used in generalizing from the descriptive data evolving from this study as the subjects were drawn from a specific population which is highly educated. I will, however, briefly summarize some of the findings from this study in order to describe the dimensions of this parenting phase from their particular perspective.

Need for Flexibility

The need for flexibility during this stage of parenting was clearly apparent in the description of these women. Mothers-in-law were presented with very different possibilities for getting to know the sons-in-law who were the focus of this study. They also emphasized that their experience had differed, or would differ substantially with another daughter.

Some subjects had known their future son-in-law for years when the couple announced their intention to marry, others had

had very little contact, or perhaps been introduced only once. Some women met their son-in-law as a mature adult, others first knew him as a young adult or adolescent, still studying or grappling with early career issues.

The context of a daughter's previous relational experience with boys and men appeared to effect the mother/in-law's attitude towards their daughter's relationship with her future spouse. One daughter had idiosyncratic interests and in this case the mother was pleased that she found someone with whom to share those interests. In another family, the daughter's previous relationships had been with men who already had commitments. When she announced she would marry someone with whom her parents had spent time on only three occasions her mother was delighted. He was unattached and the relationship seemed nourishing for her daughter.

Some daughters met their future husbands at a predictable moment, others became involved in this relationship earlier or later than expected. Some mothers-in-law immediately liked their son-in-law and thought of him as an appropriate partner for their daughter. For others the journey was more complex. These women needed time to know and understand their daughter's spouse, or future spouse more fully. For some families the son-in-law's attitudes which he brought from his own family culture seemed to fit and transfer easily to his spouse's family culture. In some families that fit was not as comfortable and both son-in-law and mother-in-law needed to grapple with and recognize their

differences.

It has been suggested that growth in "developmental parenting" occurs when parents modify images to be more consistent with reality. (Galinsky, 1981) These women did not think that they had an image of who their daughter might marry. They reflected on possible reasons for this, that their daughter had had a number of different boyfriends or perhaps she had had a limited social life so had not indicated a preference. That this group of mothers/in-law did not have an image is also congruent with their perception that each child was different and therefore would have her own journey. As one mother stated

> I don't think that I have tried to put pressure on my children to rearrange their lives, or to make them different than how they are unfolding. I think that the unfolding is supposed to be happening for them.

Mothers-in-law in describing their sons-in-law placed priority on what was shared by the couple. They described shared interests, shared values, shared philosophies and shared experiences. They also focused on the helpfulness and thoughtfulness of their sons-in-law. Duvall (1954) in his study discovered that sons-in-law were very seldom criticized. In this study, if there were difficulties with sons-in-law they were described within a framework of understanding. "Will this be a relationship that can sustain my daughter?" one mother asked. Her words reflect an approach which was shared by most of the participants.

Parenting Role During This Phase

Besides the recognized need for flexibility there was a shared understanding of other dimensions of the role of parenting an adult daughter. Mothers/in-law talked of wanting to step back but in cumulatively exploring different facets of this task indicated its complexity. Some subjects described their daughter's competence, which made it easier to step back. Pauline thought it easier to let go "if you were content with the choices that were made in marriage," but she also described herself as a "hands-on" kind of mother, "and there are times when you extend too far and have to draw back." There was a process of trial and error. Ann alluded to a cluster of factors which entered into the process of being able to step back. Her older daughter, the focus of this interview, she perceived as "wary and a planner." It was simple to think of her as an adult. A younger daughter is smaller and much more "a let's see what happens person." It was more difficult to think of her as an adult.

Subjects alluded to another aspect of stepping back when they spoke of their influence as mothers, and wanting to take care that they did not shape significant decisions which should belong to their daughters or to the couple. They believed that the couple needed to live their adult lives themselves. Again, this principle was sometimes complex to carry out. Pauline's daughter returned home at a critical point in her marriage when she found that her

husband was using cocaine. She was deciding whether to continue in the marriage or not. Her mother reported feeling tremendous stress during this period

> . . . because it was a terrible responsibility and I didn't want to make the decisions for her. The idea of sensing which decision she was leaning towards and then trying to give her the best advice possible in order to accommodate that.

Subjects talked of wanting to be flexible but also not wanting to compromise themselves. This again was simpler to articulate than to carry out and adult children posed some difficult dilemmas. Erica's daughter and son-in-law worked with her husband out of an office based at home. It became clear that Bridget was pregnant, and neither Bridget nor Michael were contemplating marriage. Erica and her husband felt that they needed to express their deeply held belief that it would appropriate for the couple to be married. The couple did agree to this and set a date six weeks after the baby was due. Bridget was also not seeing a doctor, and this created tension and frustration for her mother, especially because of the couple's proximity. But Bridget was adult and therefore could decide not to seek medical care. She eventually had her baby at home, with a midwife, inviting her mother to be present.

Subjects described at length their communication with their daughters during this phase. The importance of listening was clearly emphasized. Mothers listened to complaints, they listened while daughters articulated different aspects of a decision to be made, they listened as

a way of giving support. The telephone was used for intimate conversation so daughters did not have to live close by in order for mothers to listen.

They talked of expressing an opinion but then "leaving it alone." A number of interviewees mentioned exploring with their daughters available options and helping them to articulate choices.

Mothers described moments when they offered reassurance to their daughters, when they were able to give perspective to an issue because of their understanding of her history.

There was a shared sense among subjects that they would prefer not to witness or to become involved in conflict between members of the couple. If they were involved they attempted to articulate the problem differently or just to listen so that the solution would ultimately belong to the couple.

A significant aspect of parenting during this phase involved support of the couple's relationship. Evidence of that support was present in these mothers' ability to help the couple draw boundaries around conflict. It was present in their handling of special family occasions and holidays, which they wished to present to the couple as a choice rather than an obligation. Support for the couple's relationship was also woven through the communication which took place between mothers and daughters.

Some subjects articulated their awareness that their daughter was living and making decisions in a context which

differed from their own. This awareness appeared to not only form part of the framework of their understanding, but also to facilitate communication.

In considering their parenting role during this phase of their daughter's life, a number of subjects contrasted the relationship that they had with their daughters to that which existed between themselves and their own mothers. They described their daughters as wishing to return home if they were experiencing problems. They described themselves, when younger, as loathe to take that step, because it would have been perceived by themselves, or others, as an admission of failure. They found their daughters asking for help or advice in areas of their lives which they themselves would have kept more private, and sharing information which they had considered that their daughters might not want to share.

Relationship of This Description of Parenting to Existing Theoretical Images

This description of parenting challenges the notion of a nonexistent or static role during this stage of the family life cycle. It also challenges the emphasis placed on the need of the adult child to separate and become emotionally independent from the family of origin. It questions the implication that adult daughters, if they return home, or ask their mothers for help, "regress" to a "symbiotic phase." It appears that these daughters may have been able to return home or ask for help because their mothers

allowed them space and gave them support to make adult decisions about their future. Daughters were able to rely on nurturance of their adult selves rather than fear that they would be infantilized. It appears that the definition of parenting during this phase may have changed and also the definition of adulthood. From the perspective of these mothers it appears that daughters did not feel that they had to tackle the growth and development of their adult skills themselves, or with the help only of their spouses. It was not a renunciation of adulthood to return home or to ask for help.

Miller (1976), Gilligan (1982), Surrey (1985) and others have challenged in the last decade the emphasis on separation and individuation in developmental theory. They believe that a description of women's development should emerge out of their finding that "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and, then to maintain, affiliations and relationships" (Gilligan, 1982).

Surrey (1985) has recently described a developmental pathway for women in terms of "relationship differentiation," an image which builds on the concept of growth of "self in relation." Surrey (1985) used the construct of relationship differentiation as a contrast to the idea of separation/individuation. In defining differentiation she refers to a process:

> . . . which encompasses increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity and articulation, within the context of human relationship . . . the direction of growth is not towards degrees of autonomy or individuation and the breaking of early emotional ties but toward a process of

> growth within the relationship where both or all people involved are encouraged and challenged to maintain connection and to foster, adapt and change with the growth of the other. (p. 8)

There is certainly a striking congruence between Surrey's concept of developmental relationship differentiation and the description given by these subjects of their relationship with their daughters.

But Surrey (1985) emphasizes mutuality. The subjects in this study perceive themselves as having an ongoing parenting role beyond the sharing and growing reciprocity which they enjoyed with their daughters. Their perception of their role can be described as commitment to supporting the continuing growth of their child, the larger parenting task being to award, recognize and support the adult status of a daughter. This does not involve just a simple "stepping back." The ramifications of such a task as described by these subjects are complex and challenging. Sometimes daughters, through their decisiveness and competence, asked for this recognition early on. In some families this involved supporting both members of the couple as they struggled with issues of career, and developed further skills and competencies which would enable them to more firmly grasp this status of adulthood. It meant stepping back from decisions which were the daughters or couples to make, but allowing and encouraging communication around these decisions, articulation of different facets of the decision.
It sometimes involved a particularly intense listening so that

the daughter knew that she had an ally, someone to turn to, but not someone who would take over her life. It allowed for the "unfolding" of the daughter's own life, but within an ongoing relationship of caring and encouragement. It allows for some separation and growth toward further autonomy and independence, without defining separation and autonomy as the final goal of parenting.

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